

Emotional ecology

We no longer know what sculpture is.

This is no news, but a consensual notion that is already part of 20th-century art history. Its roots stretch beyond the detection, during the 1970s, of the expanded field of sculpture, reaching back to the intersection of art and real space. This means it does not simply date back to Rosalind Krauss' verification of the fact that sculpture develops in an expanded field, or even to earlier events, such as Gordon Matta-Clark and Robert Smithson's problematical attempt at exchanging the studio space for the world, Richard Long's peripatetic assertion, or Berndt and Illa Becher's metaphor; not even to Donald Judd's attempt to create a three-dimensional field that would not limit itself to the sculptural realm or to the history of sculpture; the roots of this impossibility to define a field for sculpture lie probably in Russian Constructivism, that is to say, in the impossibility to find an artistic expression that could distance itself from itself by means of an architectural metaphor. Or even in the separation of the sculptural from statuary, which began with Rodin and such modern statements as his *Bourgeois de Callais* and Honoré de Balzac's monument. Perhaps the negation of the sculptural is inherent to the sculptural itself, just as probably every artistic field needs an exit from itself, which makes it possible from the outside. Perhaps.

But it is a fact that the field of contemporary sculpture contains all possible modalities of artistic procedure, even those that may no longer belong to the artistic realm, but rather to the architectural, social, anthropological, documental fields, or even to mere recollection, inventory, archives, performative activities and kinematics. This ambit of multiplicity ends up by claiming for itself the following paradox: sculpture, which has always tried to define itself as an object in (private or public) space, only makes sense as a way of treating space, rather than simply as an object, which means that its material reality is not in itself, but outside itself.

Fernanda Fragateiro's work is built on this intersection. Not just the present piece, *Caixa para guardar o vazio* [Box to keep the void], but the whole of her artistic career. What does this mean, or rather: what are its immediate implications? Three basic statements come to mind: first, that Fernanda Fragateiro's oeuvre develops itself within a historical tradition that, in my opinion, descends from the utopia pursued by the Russian avant-gardes, though it has

developed in several different ways over the 20th century; second, that her perception of sculpture has always been inseparable from a plane of reality that takes the material form of something primarily designed to be of use; finally, and thirdly, that this network of connections develops itself in space, be it inner or outer, an exhibition room or a part of the cityscape, resorting to construction techniques that find in architecture their transcendental condition of possibility.

Before continuing, I would like to add a presupposition and a consequence to the above conditions. The presupposition is that Fernanda Fragateiro's body of work, of which Caixa para guardar o vazio is a part, defines itself as an attempt at understanding spatiality that is outside of an "in front of" tradition, of whatever faces us, before our eyes, before which we take up the Lacanian position of observers; instead, it presupposes a spatial penetrability, a haptic quality of the sculptural work. Consequently, her artistic creations necessarily develop themselves as architectures in order to be enjoyed, that is to say, as devices aimed at gaining existence by being used. This quality of use is, I believe, a political proposal, a feminist statement and an aesthetic sensibility at the same time.

Let us start at the beginning, and try to explain a little better these three statements about the sculptural intervention that is Caixa para guardar o vazio. Succinctly, it is a parallelepiped, apparently closed or evidently open as a Box, according to the moment when we observe it. This parallelepiped opens itself to the outside, and is totally made of wood (except for a few bits of metal in the hinges and locks of its openings).

Its appearance as a large, closed solid in space already suggests an architectural scale, because it is almost large enough to be inhabited, though its airtight quality belies that possibility. It does not possess a clear door, or entry; only outlines of doors and windows, openings which are opaque to the eyes of the visitor, still a spectator at the moment. It is also interesting to observe how the piece's monolythical character finds a strange flavour in the sensory quality of wood. This quality, especially in terms of touch, is particularly observable when the piece is installed in buildings whose construction is particularly concerned with the vision of their inside, or with their relationship with the outside, which constitute the focal point of their architectural possibilities. Such is the case of the piece's installation at Santiago de Compostela's CEGAC, a remarkable project of architect Álvaro Siza Vieira that organises space

around one's point of view. Displayed at the entrance hall, Caixa para guardar o vazio demonstrated its magnetic power over touch in two ways: by its chosen setting, in which it touched the architecture at a single point, and because its apparently inhabitable quality invited visitors to enter it, touching the wooden walls and living the piece's space from the inside, by means of touch and temperature. Thus, the piece includes a second, and even a third formulation: it opens to the outside through a series of devices that, sliding out of the structure as drawers, multiply its volume, but it is (or may be), a scenic system for the development of a set of dance-related activities, especially conceived for children by choreographer Aldara Bizarro, which take place around, inside and about the Box's space. The piece's system of outward openings evidently defines it as a device, since the Box can, through a series of simple and precise mechanical procedures, become a possibility for exploratory recreation, by means of which both its outside and inside become increasingly more complex.

This process of increasing complexity takes place via the multiplication of inner spaces inside the Box, but also through the use of a system of mirrors, a mechanism frequently used by Fernanda Fragateiro. In a certain sense, Caixa para guardar o vazio represents an integrated summary of a set of spatial subsystems the artist has lately been developing, namely through the inclusion of mirrors and the production of "floors" that cover certain areas, sometimes also resorting to mirrors placed under wooden grids, or corridors and wooden structures that act as passages, sometimes allowing for the intervention of viewers, who now become users, enjoying the possibility of intervening in the opacity itself of the passage device.

Consequently, for those who come to the Box when its entry devices are "activated", that is to say, when the system of outside openings becomes a system of entry doors to the piece's inside, it possesses an absolutely distinct presence in space. On the one hand, it is no longer a hermetic dwelling, but the mimicry of an exploratory system, which possesses a clear connection with a constructive stance, but does not refer to any specific allegory of an inhabitable system, though that does not imply it does not include a powerful set of hints at informal inhabitability. This means that, if the piece, in its open formulation, does not evoke an architecture of rationality, it nonetheless suggests informal architectures, like provisory constructions, shanties, organic developments of inhabitable spaces, what has been systematically called anarchitectures (to make free use of the term used to describe the group surrounding Gordon Matta-Clark). Such anarchitectural open systems, vernacular

in their eminent usefulness and defined by functional growth, are often used as models for artistic production, in the sense that they are not ruled by aesthetic prerogatives, being concerned with the interests of reality only, which thus leaves their possibilities of sensitive articulation open to development.

This field has been worked by Fernanda Fragateiro, not as an approach to some vernacular aesthetics, but, on the contrary, by stressing the haptic, tactile principle of its connection to use, to the touch, a process that began with the structures that define passages, then spread to her formal approach to the floor and finally, in the Box, took the form of a construction that inscribes itself in that sensitive point between dwelling, cave and building.

For the Russian avant-gardes of the 1920s and 1930s, the problem of space became, via Lazar El Lissitzky and Vladimir Tatlin, the issue of real space. This transformation, which began with Tatlin's 1914-1915 wall reliefs and continued with Lissitzky's projects for the construction of exhibition spaces, comes from a previous change in the field of sculpture, namely the option to work with various materials, unlike the single-material approach which until then characterised sculptural tradition. This option replaced the "frame" of the material with other "frames", now connected to the constructive sphere, to a self-portable quality.

According to David Summers, this is the first instance of a blurring of borders between artistic genres, since the unity once offered by a single material starts to be replaced by the need for a new kind of identity, as art, as construction and as a combination of materials that, in their heteroclite quality, invoke a new unity that exists simply in space, especially when the materials' typology leaves the "artistic" field and, from now on, will not in itself create a space of its own, except through the occupation of a real space.

Tatlin's proto-Constructivist piece, for instance, is installed on the connection between two walls (it is a corner-piece), and by thus escaping the traditional spatiality of art - walls for paintings, the ground for sculptures, the plinth that confers a hierarchy - it finds a new typology of space, turned into the material of reality, objective, common and, ultimately, social space. Over the following years, Tatlin would join a group of artists deeply committed to the Revolution. As a member of the group, he presented his project for the Monument to the Third International, which actually was not a sculpture in the traditional sense, but a building that would house the

headquarters of the Third International, with three levels rotating at different speeds (the lower levels would take a year to rotate completely, the middle level one week, and the upper level one day), in a glorious allegory of the Revolution. The project was never built, but several models were presented, namely one as high as two storeys, which created the mistaken and widespread notion that it would be just a large sculpture, when in fact it was supposed to be over four hundred metres high.

Besides the project's inherent utopian character, its most important point is the fact that it was concerned with moving from the representational space into the real space, a dislocation that is also quite visible, though in different forms, in Lissitzky, especially in his Proun Space project, which he presented in Berlin, in 1923, and later in the Kabinet für Abstrakte Kunst, commissioned by Alexander Dorner for the Landes Museum, in Hannover.

The Proun Space was described as follows by Eva Forgács: "invited to exhibit at the Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung, held at the Lehrter Bahnhof, in Berlin, from May to September 1923, Lissitzky was given a room measuring approximately 3 x 3 x 2,5mts, which he turned into a single, coherent work of art. A set of abstract and geometric forms cover the walls. Instead of using the biggest wall, the one facing the visitor at the moment he enters the room, or of leaving him in the middle of the room to experience all the space simultaneously, Lissitzky predetermined the visitor's itinerary, encouraging him to walk anti-clockwise along the walls."

This set of relations, to which we could, for different reasons - especially because of a similar interest in the notion of penetrability, of cave - add Kurt Schwitters, has interested Fernanda Fragateiro in various ways throughout her artistic career. In the beginning, what interested her most was probably the formal research on space and architecture. Later, her attention would focus on the centre of this core of artistic issues, that is to say, the arc they describe between the corporeal dimension and the space's public scale, and, more recently, also on the social side of spatiality, first approached at that time. Throughout the 20th century, this interest in real space - and in passing from an aesthetic-contemplative model to an aesthetic-participative one - is a crucial element in the transformations of artistic processes, usually analysed from an image standpoint (revealing an art history and theory that has built itself around the model of distance). This saga includes minimalism as a difficult critique of

sculpture, and would eventually become the centre of artistic disciplines that, using real space as a material for their production, adopt a strategy of sharing by means of devices.

Consequently, Fernanda Fragateiro's oeuvre is part of an outlook that lies deep into 20th century art history, probably one of the most useful instances in its migrating process, which we may describe as a passage between the representational space and the exploration of real space.

The second line of thought we have adopted to consider the Box within the context of her oeuvre was the fact that it is something primarily designed to be of use. Many of her pieces share this attribute, which is at once a characteristic and a difficulty. In the Box, both terms of the equation become amplified, making it look as if this strange object exists only for a single use. Of course, its exclusive "existence-for" is inevitable, but the use we mention here is, specifically, the playful (in the Schillerian sense) inhabiting of its structure.

In fact, the Box, as we have previously mentioned, a piece consecrated to exercises, which are either totally out of the artist's control or part of a program that, under certain circumstances, is part of the work. Thus, use is an indispensable part of the work, but that brings in the question of the piece's validity apart from its use, or of how autonomous is it from the mechanisms of use - in other words, does Fernanda Fragateiro understand form as something inseparable from the sculptural process?

The ambivalence of this process is especially intriguing, given that the piece's manipulation and mobility are its reason for being, but there is more to it than they, that is to say: the Box is a device, and must be used as such, which means that only thus it will attain its fullest validity. Yet, the fact that it is a device does not rule out a thorough, slowly-developing meditation on form and an extremely painstaking handicraft, which turn this piece into an object that lives to be aesthetically enjoyed. What does this mean?

Not only, of course, that formal thought is of paramount importance here, in the sense that its specificities are irreplaceable - the Box is what it is because it needs to be absolutely specific, not only on a gestaltic level, but also on the level of meaningful detail, like the precise hue of wood, its careful sandpapering between uses, its satiny feel, the precision of its construction, the detail that gives it a specific immanent quality. More than that, its aesthetic

quality spreads over to another field, the field of sensibility in a broader sense, its appeal to the touch, the walls' warm response, all that we have already described as its haptic quality, an aspect we will soon return to.

Thus, the Box is situated in a limbo between device and form, between a pragmatic reason and an aesthetic pre-eminence that allows us to understand that it is not a set, even though it is one. It is not a stage prop, replaceable by nature; it is the thing itself, a penetrable sculpture (there, I have said it), available for use.

The third aspect that seems important to understand the network of connections supplied by the Box lies in its relation with architecture as its condition of possibility. What do we mean by this statement? Fernanda Fragateiro's pieces possess, as it is usually said, an architectural connection. This connection is produced by several different processes, two of which are the use of a life-size scale and the permanent employment of a form of project that belongs to the cultural order of building.

We have already mapped out these connections within art history, but the artist's use of life-size scale is a personal mark since her first pieces. Her recent works configuring passages display a treatment of the body's scale, which, through subtle manipulations, connects with the architectural uncanny (in the sense used by Anthony Vidler), that is to say, precarious disagreements with the adult body's scale - thus bringing into action another kind of urgency that consists of the search for a regressive motivation, but more of that later.

For instance, the way the floors created by the artist precisely fit the unchanged space of the building where they are displayed is part of a mimetic effort concerning such architectural devices like coverings or floorboards, real entities over which we can move. It is not, then, merely a matter of using devices from architectural culture, but of producing works that are sculptural because their exogenous process finds in architectural devices its possibility of existence.

They are what they are, because to be they need something else, an architectural process. Thus her sculpture processes itself through architecture to find itself again, not as architecture, but as sculpture, as if it could not exist with resorting to a mediator. "As if" is still a hesitant statement. Architecture is its internal other, its process - even though it does not exist as architecture, but as art,

not as a model, but as a unique entity. This statement is valid for the works on a 1:1 scale, but also holds true for smaller pieces, the simulacra of others that would hypothetically be life-sized.

What happens is that their actual scale can be the model's, which becomes thus a real object, instead of a metaphor with codified semantic connections with a real and future object. It is in this sense that the statement that her work is connected with architecture still comes through as rather tentative. Its proximity is the reason for its distance, because architecture is its transcendent. Outside of it, her work has no condition of possibility. But that is precisely the reason why it is not architecture.

Having reached this point, we may finally go back to its presuppositions and then advance, to try and understand the consequences of these three conditions. We have repeatedly stated that Fernanda Fragateiro's oeuvre is based on the presupposition of its haptic pre-eminence. This pre-eminence of feel and touch lies in the fact that her work is connected to the recurring use of a basic set of materials, namely wooden boards, plywood and mirrors.

The combined use of these materials suggests an opposition, firstly of a thermal nature, but also of the interplay between opacity and transparency. Yet, the spatial multiplication performed here by the mirror happens less in terms of image than, I think, of a spatial possibility for creating connections between reality and virtuality, sometimes clearly displayed (when, for instance, the mirrors reflect texts, the indelible sign of their virtual connection), sometimes only focused on a deepening of space, a suggestion to plunge into bodily vertigo. On the other hand, the mirror stresses the meta-optic character of Fernanda Fragateiro's program, in the sense that it increases greatly the possible vision angles of the space, multiplying it.

In the Box, the permeability of vision allowed by placing the mirror on the floor, under the wooden grid on which we stand, possesses a quality of spatial duplication, as if what we saw of the structure from the outside were only a part of its complexity - and indeed it is. Its space prolongs itself virtually, even allowing us to imagine our point of view as if reflected on the mirror's depth. Yet this pre-eminence of the virtual, while made to serve a meta-optic program, is never connected with any panoptic possibility, since the guiding principle of her work is precisely the inverse of that: space is an entity that can be lived as a

condition of possibility for the experience, but it is impossible to control the conditions of vision, and any mechanisms of absolute transparency are to be avoided, because all such mechanisms are devices of domination and control - in this refusal, we find the first symptom that, in Fragateiro's most recent works, particularly in the Box, a political reading of the artistic work can be found.

Furthermore, the space's haptic character has its source in a sensibility that is, first of all, nomadic and peripatetic, and, secondly, emotionally tactile. This tactile character re-qualifies the space of the work, establishes its specificity and supplies its emotional and affective condition - as well as its precept and concept.

In other words, the creation of a tactile spatiality - what Giuliana Bruno defines as a feminist spatiality, clearly opposed to an optic-geometric spatiality -, implies the gestation of an embodied subject and, consequently, of an embodied aesthetic connection, centred in a body that moves around. That is the reason why Fernanda Fragateiro's recent pieces need ways to incorporate the body as it moves in space. On the other hand, these sculptures' definition of an embodied subject is simultaneous with the election of a temporary collective body of inhabitants of such spaces. In other words, their quality as social spaces (for they are indeed destined to sociable activities) brings in communal fictions, relational mechanisms, fragile collectives that share a common space.

In this sense, the Box becomes a device that serves a micro-utopia which is not intent on finding any process of change, but nonetheless inscribes itself in the field of biopolitics, at least because the connection it offers to its visitor becomes materialised in the offer of a fictional protocol of coexistence. Also in this sense, the Box's use as a performative device for interaction with an audience of children implies one further micro-fiction, besides the myriad possibilities already contained in the piece; now, it is inhabited by a specific, ideal community, a metaphor for the last, lost ambition of aesthetics, the act of seeing for the first time, being there for the first time, touching for the first time.

And, in this sense, Fernanda Fragateiro's work gives itself to this other fiction, for the metaphorical living of the scenic space clearly only makes sense because it has become a real, transversal, tangible space. It is by means of this tactility, of the sculpture's specific, thermal character, of the architectural approach and the fragile proposition of

temporary communities that Fernanda Fragateiro's work finds its emotional ecology. Together with ourselves.

Delfim Sardo